

Bagram PRT, Nijrab doctors work hand-in-hand to build confidence in Afghan medical system

By Senior Airman Dilia DeGrego
June 25, 2007

KAPISA PROVINCE, Afghanistan — The Nijrab hospital staff and members of the Bagram Provincial Reconstruction Team worked side-by-side to gain the confidence of locals in the Afghan medical system through a medical engagement June 22.

While the Bagram PRT has held other medical engagements in the past, this one is the first of its kind in many ways.

"This is the first true medical engagement held in Nijrab," said Air Force Capt. Erick Saks, Bagram PRT executive officer. "There have been previous medical events held in the area, but they were limited to simply providing quick medical care. This is the difference between a medical civil affairs project and a medical engagement. A medical engagement actually works toward capacity-building."

"Our goal is to build up all areas of the government to the point that the Afghan people can eventually sustain themselves," he continued. "This engagement was an opportunity to work toward that goal by building up the medical community of Nijrab."

Although PRT medics treated Afghans with various ailments during the event, the team's primary objective differed from a typical medical event this time.

"The purpose of the engagement was to work with the local national providers and gain a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Afghanistan hospital system and providers, said Air Force Dr. (Maj.) Tim Gacioch, Bagram PRT. "[The medical engagement] was an opportunity to teach and to learn. Delivering care to locals was a secondary objective.

"Afghans sometimes believe that the U.S. has the best health care in the world," he continued. "Though this is true in many ways, we don't want them to distrust their own system, so by working hand-in-hand with the local providers we show that they are providing the same level of care as we do in the U.S."

Another difference is how closely the Bagram medical staff was able to work with the Afghan providers.

"This is the first time we have worked with these health care providers in such an intimate way," said Gacioch. "More often, we only get to talk with the health-care facility administrator or higher level Ministry of Health personnel. At other medical engagements we have done in the last 90-days there were no local national providers, this meant that we had to do all the patient care ourselves and there was no opportunity to learn from each other's best practices.

“[The Afghan providers] are very bright, well educated and dedicated professionals,” Gacioch said. “After being the only ‘doc’ assigned to my PRT for so many months, I just enjoyed the opportunity to ‘talk shop’. The biggest surprise for me was how current they are on American culture. A surprise was how easy it was to communicate. We did have a dedicated interpreter, but all diseases have Latin or Greek names, so being understood was not hard at all.”

Nijrab internal medicine doctor, Dr. Serajuddin, was just as glad to be working with Coalition forces.

“I like working with the [PRT] doctors, we learn from each other,” he said. “I am very happy that they are here. It is also wonderful to see the people are getting help. Before the [Coalition forces] came, the hospital was destroyed.”

The hospital, in which the engagement was held, was built by the U.S. Agency for International Development and has served as an outpatient clinic since August 2006. The inpatient portion is due to open later this week. On average, the Nijrab doctors care for approximately 90 people daily. During the engagement, more than 160 people were seen in a four-hour time span for various ailments, ranging from muscle aches to worms. The PRT also had an opportunity to make up some minor medicine stock shortfalls with the supplies they brought with them to the hospital.

“This event was a great success,” said Saks. “Not only did we help build capacity for the hospital, but we supported a community working toward our same goals - a prosperous, secure Afghanistan.”

Gacioch agreed, “We showed the locals that the Coalition is interested in them. By coming to them, we enabled many more people to receive care than on an average day. By working with their providers, we showed that we respected their level of expertise and that [the Afghan people] should also trust their medical system.”

In the future, the Bagram PRT plans to continue to support the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and people in any area they can, ranging from medical care, agriculture and basic governance.

"Our vision is to support the reach and legitimacy of the government of Afghanistan ultimately setting the conditions for self sufficiency for the Afghan people," Saks said. "Our assistance to the government and people of Nijrab will continue as long as the community supports security and stability. The members of the PRT are proud to be part of this noble mission and are optimistic about the future of Afghanistan."